

IN THE LOOP

THE LEAP DSP QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER

This is where we "LEAP" into the work of serving our districts



RIDE

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Editors: Stacy Jones and Mike Mancieri, DSP Fellows
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Table of Contents

<u>Commissioner's Welcome</u>	2
<u>RIDE's Commitment: Recruiting More Teachers of Color</u>	2
<u>In the Spotlight: Newport—Improving School Climate Through Student Voice</u>	3
<u>Inside RIDE: DSP Fellow Azadeh Noorbaloochi</u>	5
<u>RIDE DSP Team</u>	6



Commissioner's Welcome

Welcome to *In the Loop*, a Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) quarterly newsletter for participants in the LEAP District Support Program (DSP). This publication will serve as both a resource and a space for telling the story of the work in which DSP districts are engaged. We welcome and are eager to work with the communities of Central Falls, East Providence, Johnston, Newport, North Providence, Pawtucket, Providence, West Warwick, and Woonsocket. These districts have all agreed, in partnership with RIDE, to undergo a process of deep review that is designed to help each identify priority areas and commit to addressing them by utilizing research-based practices and tools to better serve all the members of their school communities. Our inaugural issue elevates a range of voices—students, a community partner, and a RIDE employee—in addition to sharing helpful and timely resources. The DSP is a game changer—a critical effort to accelerate learning through targeted initiatives and specialized support with the goal of bolstering districts that were disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. We are thrilled that this newsletter will allow our education stakeholders to be regularly updated on the progress we are making to benefit our kids. We encourage recipients to share the newsletter with teachers, staff, parents, community stakeholders and other interested parties.

RIDE's Commitment: Recruiting More Teachers of Color

Many of our LEAP DSP districts have expressed a desire to create and establish equity and talent initiatives that will provide systemic and lasting change toward the goal of increasing the racial diversity of their educator workforce to influence improved outcomes for persistently underserved student groups (MLLs, DAS, students of color, and students from low-income families). RIDE's strategic plan will address such concerns through various initiatives, all built on a commitment to recruit, support, and retain educators of color with the goal of increasing the statewide percentage of teachers of color. This effort is multi-pronged, based on evidence that a diverse educator workforce benefits all students, and incorporates several components, including the establishment of a recruitment and hiring platform, anti-bias hiring guidance, professional learning to maximize belonging in our schools and mentoring support for early-career educators of color. Be on the lookout for more detailed information.

In the Spotlight: Newport—Improving School Climate Through Student Voice

By Stacy Jones

The school year was still young in October 2021 at Thompson Middle School in Newport, RI. Yet, a group of 20 students had consistently received numerous referrals per month for fighting, or for what teachers labeled aggression or anger. The students were stuck in a destructive cycle, and the staff was at a loss for how to respond. It was this situation that produced the Heart Club, with the help of a trusted Newport School District community partner, FabNewport.

“If a student, within two months of school starting, is getting constant referrals to the dean, there is a deeper issue that goes beyond behavior,” said FabNewport’s Director of Community Engagement Ellen Pinnock, who introduced the Heart Club to the middle school. FabNewport is a nonprofit focused on immersive experiential and place-based programs to support social and emotional learning. A Newport native, Pinnock has lived in the city most of her life, and her daughter is a student at Newport’s Rogers High School. Pinnock brought personal, historical and practical knowledge, making her the perfect conduit to convey student voice to administrators’ ears.

The goals for the Heart Club program were to improve relationships for black and brown students at Thompson and give them an environment of their own. (All, except two, of the students in the program identify as BIPOC—Black, Indigenous, and people of color.) One perspective that was not considered by Pinnock: an authoritarian approach. “I am a Black woman, so the last thing I wanted to be to these kids is a disciplinarian, because there’s enough of that.”

Making the Heart Club a reality required collaboration among many stakeholders: parents, students, and administrators. Pinnock’s first move was to contact the students’ parents to get buy-in and approval to participate. Next, was determining a time and place to meet. Mondays and Fridays. During advisory. In the principal’s office.

On January 18th, 2021, the Club held its first meeting. In attendance were 20 students, Pinnock, Chris Gross, FabNewport’s Chief Empathy Officer, and Nahly, an emotional support Golden Retriever. Over the course of four weeks, there were lots of discussions initiated by the students in between and during games and food challenges. The principal, Xavier Barrios, remains an ardent supporter and sometimes Heart Club participant. Said Pinnock, “The kids love him. He’s not standing above them talking down. He has a seat with them and talks about what is going on. He centers the kids in a way that they really need.”

The results have been promising. To date, out of the 20 Club members, only two have been referred to the dean—and each only once. And, the Heart Club newsletter launched in March.

“Social Emotional Learning occurs best in real-world settings, places where young people are authentically engaged with diverse people and places and are securely challenged physically and emotionally,” said Pinnock. “These experiences lay the foundation for growth in more traditional subject areas.”

Such an approach was implemented at Newport’s Rogers and Met High Schools. The students at both schools wanted change. Though two of the most racially diverse schools in the state, many BIPOC students felt too many aspects of their school experience left them out of the picture. Accounting for nearly 65% of the student population at Rogers, and approximately 41% at the Met, these equity champions acted, with the support of Pinnock and Gross, to form the Young Philosophers’ Club.

The communal rallying cry for the students was the buildup of several factors. At Rogers, some students wanted more diversity in sports offerings, others wanted a Black Lives Matter logo painted on the gym floor. For the school’s BIPOC students in Cosmetology—80% of the class—neither the materials and products, nor the mannequins, reflected their hair or hair needs. “If they were going into the cosmetology field, they wanted to be able to work multiculturally,” said Pinnock. To organize efforts, a Diversity Relevance Committee was established, and the group began working on a Diversity, Equity and Inclusion policy. To date, the Committee has successfully lobbied for the BLM logo, which has been added to the Rogers’ gym floor; addressed the Cosmetology issues in collaboration with the teacher; and established curriculum conversations amongst teachers, students and administrators after a teacher’s midterm included offensive traits for Native Americans.

The task of listening to and elevating student voices continues in Newport. “It’s not perfect, but we’re working hard towards making it better for the kids however we can,” added Pinnock. “However, I am staying aware. I know about honeymoon periods, but I have faith in the kids. They are so excited when they leave, and they keep showing up. So that gives me faith that all is going in the right direction.”

Inside RIDE: DSP Fellow Azadeh Noorbaloochi

Azadeh “Azi” Noorbaloochi, came to RIDE in October of 2021. Azi brings over 15 years of experience to this work as both a classroom teacher and an administrative leader. Azi is married with two children (and a dog named Skittles). She loves to host friends—anyone who visits her home is an instant friend—and paints in her spare time. We stopped by Azi’s office where she was working to develop the DSP Accelerant platform for the next phase of the DSP program. We asked her a few questions:

Which districts do you support?

North Providence, West Warwick and Woonsocket.

What did you do before working at RIDE?

For the last five years, I served as an Assistant Principal at Alan Shawn Feinstein Middle School in Coventry. The three years prior, I was the Assistant Principal at Coventry High School. I was most passionate about MTSS, advocating for the most marginalized students and improving the culture and climate of the schools I was a part of.

In one word, describe your personality.

Passionate. Whatever I delve into, I go all in.

What excites you the most about the LEAP DSP Program?

We are creating this from the ground up. I am especially excited that our work is reimagining the RIDE system to be more collaborative and supportive of our districts, as opposed to a top-down approach.

If you had a magic wand, what would you change about RIDE?

I would break down the office dividers to make true teamwork possible and allow laughter and color into the workplace.



RIDE DSP Team

- Kristen Danusis, Director, Office of School and District Improvement
- Michael Mancieri, District Support Fellow
- Azadeh Noorbaloochi, District Support Fellow
- Stacy Jones, District Support Fellow

